

Higher education is a necessary concomitant to national progress

Guest Column

By Srinath Fernando

IT is deplorable to see that our higher educational institutions have been in doldrums for years owing to trade union action, due to student unrest or may have been rendered dysfunctional due to lack of financial allocations.

Development of human capital is the most important element in national progress. Development of university facilities have been in abeyance for quite a considerable time due to 30-year-long civil war which crippled our economy.

If one were to analyse the budgetary allocation for other areas of the economy, one would see there are areas where budgetary allocations are far in excess of the real requirements, but education has been neglected for decades.

Most importantly, economic development is the upgradation of our higher educational institutions. Right to education is one of the fundamental rights under the Constitution. Depriving the population with education is a tacit violation of the rights of the citizens.

Late Lalith Athulathmudali had the wisdom to create Mahapola scholarships for needy students. Higher education at policy level lacks people of calibre who could deliver the level of education needed to propel Sri Lanka to a higher level at which it could compete with other universities of the world.

A considerable amount of foreign exchange could thus be saved by providing quality choices for Sri Lankan students who are in search of opportunities worldwide. This underscores the fact that upgrading our own universities is of paramount importance.

British colonial inheritance

We have inherited a fairly good educational grounding from our colonial masters and no one can deny the fact that some of the prominent members of the independence struggle have had quality education at British universities.

The British administration has been instrumental in imparting knowledge and nurturing the institutions of education not only in Ceylon but in other British colonies. Universities of Ceylon, Calcutta and Madras have had long association with British educational institutes and policies. Intellectual development in India was largely due to Lord Macaulay, who in his minutes of 1835, advocated "efforts to make natives of the country thoroughly good English scholars".

Sir Charles Wood's Dispatch of 1854, famously known as the 'Magna Carta of English Education in India,' recommended creating a properly articulated scheme of education from the primary school to the university. It sought to encourage indigenous education and planned the formulation of a coherent policy of education. Subsequently, the universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras were set up in 1857, followed by the University of Allahabad in 1887.

These institutions have produced intellectuals with highest credentials and but unfortunately the higher education in Sri Lanka seems to have been caught in a policy paralysis. It has been almost six decades since we gained independence and Sri Lankans still go in search of universities abroad for higher education whereas universities in Sri Lanka have been shut for reasons where the Government has not been able to find solutions.

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Most of the demands put forward by the FUTA are reasonable and must be looked into with favour. FUTA represents the educated elite who impart knowledge to future generations and as such the demands of FUTA must be viewed with utmost care - Pic courtesy FUTA Sri Lanka Facebook page

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FUTA is not a bunch of individuals who could be persuaded to accept the Government side of the story because FUTA represents real national figures who know very well how the national policies are adopted and implemented. FUTA cannot be hoodwinked easily unlike other trade unions.

National University of Sri Lanka (NUSL) concept

National University is a concept under which various higher educational institutions are brought under one umbrella so that resources could be better allocated and exchanged. If there are assets idle at one university and another university is lacking those assets and if these two universities are brought under one roof, it would be easy to exchange the assets as and when there are requirements. There will be greater liberality in exchanging resources including human resources.

The Government should consider streamlining some of the administrative arrangements of some of the campuses such as Universities of Kelaniya, Peradeniya, Ruhuna, Eastern, South Eastern, Rajarata, Sabaragamuwa, Wayamba, Visual Arts and Performing Arts and Uva Wellassa under the NUSL concept through a legislative framework.

This would enable the universities to mitigate capital, administrative and operational costs. This concept simply optimises better use of existing facilities

FT Quote

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and resources. However, under existing laws of the country, this cannot be achieved unless a legislative framework is in place.

Zigzag over Z score

It is a national shame that a system of selection for university entry which has been in existence since 2000 without any problems has suddenly run aground due to the adoption of an arbitrary mechanism. The issue went to the highest court of Sri Lanka in order to seek justice. The Supreme Court has restored the natural justice by ordering the re-calculation of the Z score.

There are two Ministers for Higher Education and 100+ ministers to find solutions for the country.

Where is the collective responsibility? Where is the collective wisdom of the Cabinet of Ministers? What is the net worth of keeping and sustaining such a large number of a privileged lot at the expense of public money if they cannot find solutions to the problems that beset the country?

There is a crisis over ever-increasing lawlessness and absence of rule of law, media freedom, high cost of living, integrity in public life, and now a crisis in education. What more would there be? This flu would spread to other sectors of society if not treated at the right time in the right manner.

Importance of higher education

When it comes to free education, we cannot forget the role played by Dr. C.W.W. Kannangara, the then Minister of Education at the State Council, and he chaired an important committee.

The vision he envisaged for all Sri Lanka was that education should be free

from the kindergarten to the university, the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction in the primary schools, English should be taught in all schools from third standard, and a curriculum for the child which would develop its "head, heart and hands" should be introduced. In other words, the education of the emotions is as necessary as the education of intellect and practical ability for the well-being of the child.

Today Sri Lanka's literacy rate ranks at 92% of the population. This is a significant achievement and mirrors the intellectual capacity of its citizens. Real exploitation of this fact is by providing the citizens with educational opportunities and has the potential to produce a quality work force.

Human resource development and the mobilisation of human talent and potential through lifelong learning would tremendously contribute to the social, economic, cultural and intellectual life of a rapidly changing global society.

High level skills training would be required to strengthen our enterprises, services and infrastructure. This requires the development of professionals and knowledge workers with globally equivalent skills, but should be made conscious of the socially responsibility and the role in contributing to the national development effort and social transformation. It is also important to develop, produce and acquire new knowledge.

The national growth and competitiveness is dependent on continuous technological improvement and innovation, sustained by a well funded, organised, vibrant and motivated research and development system that integrates the research and training capacity of higher education with the needs of industry and of social reconstruction.

The university research should be funded by private capital as well. The business chambers of Sri Lanka must look into harnessing the intellectual talents of our academics by providing the universities with funds for further advanced research that would allow our local industries to compete in the global market.

(The writer is a freelance journalist and a political lobbying and government affairs consultant.)

World economic recovery suffers fresh setbacks, ICC/Ifo survey shows

RESULTS of the ICC-Ifo World Economic Survey, released recently, reveal declining optimism over global economic recovery as fear continues to spread about the unsolved debt crisis in Europe.

The Survey, which received responses from 1,079 experts in 123 countries, showed that the world economic climate indicator fell to 85.1 in Q3 2012 after two successive increases. These results are significantly below the long-term average of 96.7 (1996-2011) for the Survey, conducted by the Munich-based Ifo Institute for Economic Research and

the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC).

These findings imply a setback in the recovery of the world economy due to unfavourable assessments of the current economic climate and a less positive six-month outlook than in previous quarters, particularly in Europe.

The climate indicator for Europe sunk to 88.9 for the current quarter, down 20 points from its long-term average of 109.0.

"Political decisions are urgently needed in order to counter this widespread negative outlook and to boost investor confidence, start-

ing with resolving the debt crisis in Europe," said ICC Secretary General Jean-Guy Carrier.

While the experts downgraded their evaluation of the economic climate from previous quarters – standing at 82.4 and 95.0 in Q1 and Q2 of this year respectively – they implied that the global economy is still in recovery and has not fallen back into recession.

"What was surprising in this quarter is that the optimism that things will soon turn around has almost disappeared," said Gernot Nerb, Ifo Director of Business Surveys. "This underscores

that political actors like the European Central Bank should not wait much longer with actions to stabilize markets."

Brighter days ahead for Asia

There is cause for some optimism, however, according to the Survey findings, which revealed that economic sentiment is improving in China, where experts anticipate further stimulus from the Chinese central bank and inflation seems to be under control.

In Western Europe and North America, the economic climate indicator fell com-

pared to the second quarter, mainly due to far less positive expectations for the next six months. While in Asia, less favourable assessments of the current economic situation were primarily responsible for the indicator's decline, after a strong upturn in the previous quarter.

Debt crisis takes a toll on Europe

The outlook among experts in Europe dampened, according to Survey results, because of the worsening debt crisis that has been hampering economic activity in the euro area.

In Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Cyprus, assessments of the current economic situation remained at recession level. Assessments of the situation in Belgium, France, Ireland, The Netherlands and Slovenia were only slightly better. While in Germany, Estonia and Finland, the majority of participants continued to assess the current economic situation positively, although to a lesser extent than in the previous quarter.

Ireland and The Netherlands are the only countries where expectations have risen and are pointing to modest recovery

in economic activity.

Inflation fears abate

World average inflation estimates for 2012 dropped to 3.4% in Q3, down from 3.6% in the previous quarter, according to the Survey. Weakening global demand has led to lower raw material prices and has been forcing companies worldwide to maintain stable selling prices or even to reduce them in order to be competitive. The experts polled on average expected short-term interest rates to fall over the next six months, but forecast that long-term interest rates would increase slightly.

FT Alert

In tomorrow's Weekend FT:
'Destiny of the Pearl: How Colombo consensus trumped Beijing and Washington in the Indian Ocean' by Patrick Mendis



CONSPIRACY DESK

By Dinesh Watawana

All in the name of a goat

A goat's best friend is Mervyn! The populace has been cruel to him. Ok, to the goat too, but I am talking about a man willing to be incarcerated just to liberate a hapless animal. Thankfully, the President interceded and saved the day for both.

The Minister had promised to defy a Court order and come to the rescue of the beasts at a traditional sacrificial ritual at the Kali Amman Kovil in Munneswaram, an act that would have earned him an inevitable stay at the Mahagedera of Welikada fame. A noble act in the eyes of some but the last thing the islanders want is another communal crisis, this time over a goat!

When Mervyn Silva speaks, all listen. He avers in true Dutugemunu style, brandishing amour-propre and intellect. It is his choice of crusades and penchant for the audacious which often lands him smack in the middle of television cameras. He has been fittingly endowed with a portfolio that makes any public business his own business.

So folks the man is just doing his job, for which he gets no kudos except from his electorate. The man will be re-elected and make no mistake he will continue to fight for the goats.

I can swear I spotted a goat on the Blue Moon Mt. Lavinia beach resembled a sea of revelers. My expat friends Andrew and Maureen wanted to sip a sundowner while our families waited for the lunar spectacle but the chappie at La Mont Blanc politely reminded us of the somber occasion on account of the Poya. He also said that plain-clothed cops were very suspicious of tea cups, so we didn't have tea.

Mt. Lavinia, Sri Lanka's most faddish stretch of seafront is a crying shame. There's no okey dokey access or parking; no infrastructure requisites or value-additions befitting such an iconic destination. An aerial passage for the train lines would nicely free up valuable land and imagine what you could do with that! Once this whole goat episode is cooked and done with I hope Minister Silva will take it up as his next crusade. We are talking of a huge vote bank waiting to be had on the beach for the blue clan!

Larry and Marvin, meanwhile, were headed home after a big night on the town when Larry hits a goat. Marvin being the animal lover jumps out of the car and revives him. Marvin insisted they take the goat home but politely asked Larry if he was ok with the smell. "That's ok, we'll hold the goat's nose," he said.

Finally I met the protagonist of my story. Not the goat you fools, the Minister! He looked angry and lunged at my throat as if he were catching a goat of the green types. "You idiot, you called me a goat!" he yelled. "You goat, I didn't." I yelled back, instinctively grabbing his neck myself. A duel of the Dutugamunu-Elara magnitude was in the making. A seemingly routine meeting with a constituent had assumed goatly proportions. December 21 suddenly felt very real.

"You goat, are you trying to strangle me?" I woke up in a bath of sweat as Michelle, my wife, struggled for breath. For a moment I thought I had really written a piece derogatory of a hardworking Minister. But it was only a dream.

I'm late. I have a column to write and a deadline to meet.

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